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NARRATIVE

OF THE

CAPTURE AND MURDER

OF

MAJOR JAMES WILSON

BY CYRUS A. PETERSON
PRESIDENT, THE MISSOURI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

READ BEFORE THE PIKE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, JANUARY 26, 1906

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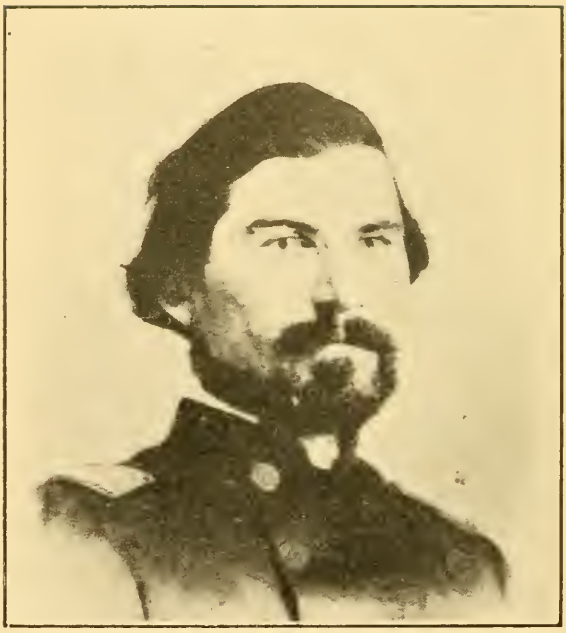

MAJOR JAMES WILSON

3RD M. S. M. CAV.

BORN, May 28, 1834, in Prince George County, Maryland.

MURDERED by Price's raiders in Franklin County, Missouri, October 3, 1864.

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A NARRATION OF THE CAPTURE AND MURDER OF MAJOR JAMES WILSON IN 1864.

Mr. President and Members of the Pike County Historical Society:

At the invitation of your honorable Secretary, I have made a brief chronological arrangement of the events interwoven with the capture and murder of Major James Wilson and six soldiers of his command in the fall of 1864, and as a prelude to the statement of unpleasant facts to be herein later related it cannot be improper to offer some historic account of the state of affairs existing in Missouri at that time. Younger generations will scarcely be able to comprehend the actual conditions then prevailing, and the true character of the raiders and their commander, hence the writer will draw upon none but Confederate sources in depicting the hopeless depravity of the marauders under Sterling Price who perpetrated this foul crime.

The Secession Governor of Missouri, Thomas C. Reynolds, wrote his recollections of the events of the war soon after its close, and in describing the preparations for the Price raid, which among other things was to install him as Governor at Jefferson City, he narrates the incident of a visit to Price's camp in Arkansas, using the following language: "While visiting some of General Price's officers at his wagon camp, the conversation turned on the Unionists of Missouri, 'Old Captain Price,' a very worthy relative of General Price and a complete echo of his talk, being constantly near him, was present, and also Col. Clay Taylor. I forget who were the others. They were both very savage in expressing their intentions of personal venegeance

on some they respectively named as having done them wrongs. Without entering into any discussion, I suggested to them that the treatment of the Unionists was a most grave and delicate question, which the Confederate and State Governments alone could decide; and that I believed that even they, Col. Taylor and Capt. Price, would be in such excellent humor on being restored to their homes, that they would forgive even their worst enemies. I may also have added (though I am not positive) that at any rate I trusted they were too good citizens to disturb anyone the Governor of the State might pardon. But Captain Price declared there was one man whom he would avenge himself on anyhow and Col. Taylor said that there was another who he also would take personal vengeance on in any event."

With this inhuman spirit in the ascendancy at Price's headquarters no one can be surprised that it prevailed throughout the undisciplined rabble most appropriately termed by Governor Reynolds at the time as a "Calmuck horde" which made up Price's aggregate of thirty thousand men.

Thirty years after the war, Captain T. J. Mackey, of Price's staff, in writing of the raid through Missouri in September and October, 1864, said:

"I was assigned to duty as its (the army's) Chief Engineer, a most unwelcome service to me, as the war in that section had degenerated into a fierce vendetta and for three years bands of armed marauders marching under the flag of the Confederacy had committed atrocities which stamped the State as the sink of American civilization."

Describing the battle of Pilot Knob, Capt. Mackey says:

"In resisting our advance through the pass, Major Wilson was captured with six of his men and they were all barbarously murdered a few days later by soldiers of Marmaduke's Division led by one of their field officers."

John N. Edwards, a member of Joe Shelby's staff, published a volume of gasconade a few years after the war, en-

titled "Shelby and His Men," and in speaking of the murder of Major Wilson and his men he says:

"It is by no means certain that his death was authorized by General Price, although, as the Commander-in-Chief he was to a limited degree responsible for it." Further on in his book he speaks of the great number of prisoners murdered in the latter part of the raid, and says: "They sleep in unknown graves from Jefferson City to Newtonia."

In a later essay, Edwards speaks of the raid and its commander as follows: "That last march of 1864, the stupidest, wildest, wantonest, wickedest march ever made by a bad general who had a voice like a lion and a spring like a guinea pig."

To put the minds of incredulous persons at ease, none but Confederate authorities have been cited in the preceding statement and the writer now begs to say that he has interviewed hundreds of eye-witnesses and participants in the events chronologically set forth in the succeeding paragraphs of this paper, and has obtained written statements from many of them. The company rolls of all organizations opposed to Price's advance into Missouri in 1864 have been carefully studied and the events related may be accepted as accurate.

During this long search it has developed that from the time that Price entered Missouri on September 19th, 1864, until October 3, 1864, thirty-five prisoners had been assassinated and brutal attempts had been made on two others, who fortunately escaped. The writer has succeeded in identifying all of these thirty-five martyrs but two, and now scarcely hopes that their identity will ever be recovered.

It will thus appear that the murder of Major Wilson was merely an incident in the greatest carnival of crime ever enacted on American soil. The following is a correct chronology of the immediate events leading to Major Wilson's martyrdom.

In September, 1864, he was in command of a military

sub-district in Southeast Missouri, with headquarters at Pilot Knob. On the 17th of that month he ordered a scouting party under Lieut. Erich Pape of company K of his regiment (Third M. S. M.) to go south until he had located the head of Price's invading column, which was then known to be coming into Missouri, and then return and report. The scout under Lieut. Pape consisted of company K and a detail from company I of the same regiment, under command of Sergt. Simon U. Branstetter. At Patterson, Mo., where Capt. Robert McElroy, of company D, Third M. S. M. cavalry, was in command of the advanced post, a few men were detached from McElroy's company on September 18th and added to Lieut. Pape's scouting party. Also a few men (mounted) from the 47th Missouri Infantry, under Lieut. James S. McMurtry. The scouting party then consisted of 86 men and three commissioned officers: Lieuts. Pape and Brawner of company K, Third M. S. M. cavalry, and Lieut. James S. McMurtry of company A. 47th Missouri Infantry.

By making a forced march the scout reached Doniphan in the forenoon of September 19th, where it met the advance of Price's army, consisting of about 150 or 200 men under Lieut. Col. Rector Johnson of General Marmaduke's Division. A vigorous charge was made into the Rebel command and Col. Johnson and his men fell back in confusion with Lieut. Pape pursuing almost to the State line. Pape then returned through Doniphan and at nightfall went into camp at a point ten miles north, or northeast, of that town at the Vandiver farm, near Ponder's Mill, on Little Black River..

This was in what was then familiarly called "Secesh Country" there being none but Southern sympathizers living anywhere near, and while Lieut. Pape took the ordinary precaution to post camp guards, he did not take into consideration the dangerous element of non-combatants living all around his bivouac. On the morning of September

20th he and his command were aroused by a Confederate force of several hundred under Lieut. Col. Rector Johnson closing in on them from the east, west and north. Hastily mounting, Lieut. Pape gave orders to his men to cut their way through the Rebel line to the north, leading the charge himself. This was successfully done, but Lieut. William Brawner was left behind dismounted and wounded, and from all that could be afterward learned he was murdered as soon as he fell into the hands of his captors.

Sergt. Branstetter was bringing up the rear of Pape's command with the detail from company I, and he and six of his men were captured by the Rebels closing up their lines where Pape had cut his way through. The six men of company I who were captured with Branstetter were Corporal Wm. W. Gourley, and Privates Hiram Berry, Oscar O. Gilbert, Wm. C. Grotts, Wm. Scaggs and John W. Shew.

Immediately upon giving up his side arms, Sergt. Branstetter was shot down in cold blood, a ball passing through his right lung and the shock knocking him senseless to the ground. When he recovered consciousness the Rebels were stripping his clothes from his body which they denuded completely, except for the badly blood-soaked shirt covering his trunk. They dug a shallow grave by his side in which they intended to bury him, but observing that he was still breathing, they covered his body with fence rails and rode away, leaving him to his fate. After one of the most remarkable and torturing experiences ever undergone by any mortal, Branstetter recovered and is today living near Vandalia, Mo. The other six men of company I were marched on foot as prisoners, being compelled to keep pace with cavalry guards until October 3, 1864, when they were disposed of by parole or murder.

On September 22nd, Shelby's Division of Price's army reached Patterson, Mo., driving out Capt. McElroy's small command and capturing seven prisoners, two men of company K, Third M. S. M. cavalry, and five men of the 47th

Missouri Infantry. These seven prisoners were all wantonly murdered soon after they were captured. Shelby in his official report, with brutal frankness, says they "were captured and killed." From this point forward scores of bodies, the corpses of prisoners most brutally murdered, marked the trail of Price's army through Missouri and Kansas, but these cannot be treated in detail in a limited paper like this.

On September 26th Price's army concentrated at Arcadia, and on the 27th the battle of Pilot Knob was fought. In this battle Major Wilson held the left of the skirmish line, being located on Pilot Knob with about 200 men, dismounted and deployed. At that time he was suffering from a slight scalp wound received in the skirmishing the day before, in the lower end of Arcadia Valley, which had caused considerable hemorrhage, but had not kept him out of the saddle or off the field. About 2 P. M. on the 27th, Price's army made its desperate, but disastrous, assault on Fort Davidson, and Fagan's Division having the right of the line swept over Pilot Knob mountain, dislodging Major Wilson's handful of men and capturing Major Wilson and two men of his regiment, John Holabaugh of company K and William Axford of Company H. These three were started under escort toward Arcadia, where Price's headquarters had been established, and where the prisoners accumulated in the raid up to this point were held in corral. They had not proceeded far until the repulsed and demoralized troops of Fagan's Division swept down the valley in a frantic stampede in which the guards over the prisoners joined, leaving Wilson and the two enlisted men in this wild mob of rebels. Major Wilson then turned back towards the fort with the two men, and was met by Lieut. Col. John P. Bull, who had just led 200 picked men of his Arkansas regiment against the fort and had left 42 of them dead or mortally wounded on the field. Though in full retreat with his men, Col. Bull was composed enough to recognize a

Federal Major and two privates as a strange spectacle stemming their way in the contrary direction through the fleeing rebel host, and at once took charge of them and turned them into the prison corral at Arcadia.

On September 28th, Dr. S. D. Carpenter left the hospital at Pilot Knob, and going to the prison corral, which had been moved up to that point on that date, dressed Major Wilson's wound. This was probably the last surgical attention he received and from this time forward he did not receive a single act of courtesy or civility from his captors. He was compelled to march on foot with citizens and enlisted men who had been taken prisoners, and keep pace with cavalry guards through five days march, covering a total distance of 80 miles, although he was a field officer; while an uninjured line officer, who had been taken prisoner at the same time as Wilson, was furnished an ambulance in which to ride. Each night the prisoners were corralled, or put under a chain guard as near Price's headquarters as physical conditions and topography of the ground would permit, and thus the march was conducted from Pilot Knob to a point ten miles west of Union, Missouri, in Franklin County, where the "Calmuck horde" arrived on the evening of October 2nd. During these five days march the prisoners had to wade many small streams, and other larger ones, such as the Meramec River and some of its tributaries, which added materially to their hardships and discomforts. Price's army having no Provost Marshal General in its organization up to this time, the accumulated prisoners were under charge of Col. John T. Crisp, who had been assigned to the duty of looking after them.

On the morning of October 3rd, 1864, before breaking camp for the day's march toward Jefferson City, and while the prisoners were being held under heavy guard, within 40 or 50 yards of Price's headquarters, the guerilla leader, Col. Timothy Reeves, of Fagan's Division, and another officer whose identity has never been ascertained,

rode up to the prisoners and ordered them to fall into line in the road, facing the two Rebel officers. One of them held a slip of paper or a memorandum in his hand and riding slowly along the line each prisoner was asked to give his name, with his rank and command, if he was a soldier. Each prisoner who gave his command as being the Third M. S. M. cavalry was ordered to step two paces to the front. In making correct responses in this manner, Major Wilson and five enlisted men of his regiment sealed their fate, as the two steps forward meant their death. The five enlisted men were Corpl. Wm. W. Gourley and Privts. Wm. C. Grotts, Wm. Scaggs and John W. Shew of Co. I, Third M. S. M., and John Holabaugh of company K, same regiment. Three more men of the Third M. S. M. cavalry remained in the line of prisoners, but by a sort of psychological impulse realized that a correct account of themselves meant their early execution, and like Peter on the night of the last supper denied their identity. Hiram Berry and Oscar O. Gilbert, of company I, by hasty agreement between themselves, gave their regiment as the 17th Illinois Cavalry, and they were not asked to step forward. William Axford of Company H, was farther down the line among strangers, and when he noted that all members of his regiment were being stepped to the front, he spoke to the man next in line on his right, John Zoller of company B. 14th Iowa Infantry, and said: "They are going to shoot all of the Third M. S. M. prisoners, what shall I do?" Zoller hastily replied: "Give the same company and regiment that I do." This Axford did and he was saved.

While this tragic scene was being enacted, an unfortunate prisoner, to this day unknown, thinking no doubt that members of the third M. S. M were being selected for first squad to be paroled (for the question of paroling the prisoners had been discussed that morning), undoubtedly gave this regiment as the command to which he belonged and was stepped to the front condemned to death. Who he was

or what command he belonged to will perhaps never be known, but in all probability he was a member of the 47th Missouri Infantry or of Battery H, Second Missouri Light Artillery, as both of these organizations had several men marked first as missing and later as deserters, after the battle of Pilot Knob, who were never afterward heard of, either by return to their commands or to their homes.

Major Wilson and the six enlisted men who had been stepped to the front were marched away in charge of the shooting squad, right in the presence of General Price and his staff and the 400 or more prisoners, taken over a hill through an old abandoned field, and the volley fired which killed them, was distinctly heard and some of the prisoners even claimed to have seen the smoke from the guns rise above the top of the hill.

The other prisoners were all paroled within the next hour or two and given their liberty to return to their commands or to civilization, by whatever means they could devise. And then one of the most unaccountable events of the Civil War occurred. These prisoners broke up into irregular squads and started across the country, north, east and southeast, according to their individual election, publishing the news that Major Wilson and six of his men had been taken out and shot, at a point ten miles west of Union, and two days later this information was officially communicated to military headquarters in St. Louis. By that time (October 5th) the vicinity of the murder was again under Federal control, and while several dozen of the paroled prisoners lived in the immediate neighborhood of the point where the murder occurred, no move was made to recover and care for the bodies of the murdered men, and none of the released prisoners went back to the ground to see the result of the volley fired by the execution squad. Every one connected with the Federal forces, from General Rosecranz down to the paroled militiamen of Franklin County, seemed to be stupefied by the rapidly occurring events of the day, or hypnotized by a

hope that the facts reported could not be true because of their revolting atrocity, and thus the matter was dropped.

Three weeks later a youth of the neighborhood while straying through the old field hunting persimmons, came upon the bodies of Major Wilson and the six men, too far decomposed to be recognizable, except by their clothing and insignia of rank or by papers on the bodies.

The matter of holding an inquest over the bodies and afterward consigning them to decent burial among friends is too well known to require recapitulation here. The writer, however, would call attention to the official statement made at the time that one of the bodies found with Major Wilson was dressed in an artillery bugler's uniform, and as none of the identified men were entitled to wear such insignia, an extended search was made by the writer with the hope that this clue might lead to the identity of the unknown sixth man. A careful analysis of the forces opposed to Price's invasion of Missouri up to this point, developed the fact that only seven men had been engaged in this resistance who wore artillery bugler's uniforms. These were two buglers in Co. I and two in Co. K of the Third M. S. M. Cav. and three in battery H, of the Second Missouri Light Artillery. But those seven men are all accounted for on their company rolls at the end of the war and the last clue on which a hope could be entertained for the identification of this unknown victim of outlaw vengeance had vanished.

CYRUS A. PETERSON.

St. Louis, Mo., January 18th, 1906.

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